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BIGFOOT — A Contemporary Belief Legend

JOYCE BYNUM*

ALMOST EVERY AMERICAN has heard of the large, hairy "ape man," sometimes called Bigfoot or Sasquatch, who appears mysteriously from time to time; but few realize that sightings of this creature are not limited to the Pacific Northwest but occur throughout the United States and Canada. To date, the only "hard" evidence we have of Bigfoot's existence consists of casts of large footprints, some poorly-focused photographs, and some hair, blood, and feces samples. The bulk of evidence to support belief in Bigfoot's existence comes from personal accounts by people who claim they saw him.

Throughout the world, people for many centuries have believed in the existence of wild, hairy creatures, some of them "mythological" and others "real," some more human and others more ape-like. The "wild human" variety includes Enkidu of Mesopotamian mythology, a "natural" man with the ability to communicate with animals, and Esau in the Bible, whose body was covered with rough animal hair, and who also had a very strong, offensive odor. In European history, the "noble savage" idea was prevalent for several centuries, and influenced the creation of characters such as Ben Gunn

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in *Treasure Island*, and Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, who were wild men, hairy and nearly naked. Also widespread were stories of feral children who were raised by wild animals and popularized in the Tarzan epic.

Hominoids such as Bigfoot, however, are quite different from human beings who either have some animal characteristics or who change themselves temporarily into animals, since beings of the Bigfoot variety are believed to constitute a separate biological subspecies closely related to humans. Most Bigfoot buffs believe the same subspecies includes "Yeti" (the Abominable Snowman) of the Himalayas, who was first reported to the West in 1921 by Howard Bury after he attempted to climb Mount Everest. (In other reports Yeti is much smaller and has reddish hair.) (1)

Europeans once believed in the existence of a hairy, large hominoid, as demonstrated not only by Carl von Linne, the Swedish botanist, who included such a hominoid in his taxonomy, but in other accounts as well. Apparently the European hominoids of earlier times were very similar to Bigfoot, in that they were very large, hairy creatures who emitted high-pitched screams or whistles, possessed a strong body odor, and sometimes appeared with females who had long, pendulous breasts. (2)

In North America, early trappers and settlers in the Pacific Northwest began to hear stories told by Indians of a large, hairy, man-like creature called Sasquatch, or Bigfoot, and soon newspapers carried accounts of sightings of such a creature by both Indians and whites. *The Victoria Colonist* (British Columbia), July 3, 1884, reported the capture of a "gorilla type" creature, four feet seven inches tall, weighing 127 pounds and covered with glossy hair an inch long. The creature "possessed extraordinary strength." Its keeper planned to take it to England to exhibit it, but there is no record of its subsequent fate. (3) *The Butte Record* (California), November 5, 1870, has an account of the sighting of a male "gorilla or wildman," (sometimes accompanied by a female), who stood about five feet high and was disproportionately broad, covered with dark cinnamon-colored hair, and who whistled and played with burning sticks from a hunter's fire. Other

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19th century newspaper accounts tell of sightings of creatures who were seven feet tall. (4)

After the publication of stories of the Himalayan Yeti in the 1920s, reports of sightings of Bigfoot in North America began to increase, but some believers explain that before that time Americans were isolated and had nobody with whom to share their experiences. In the past few years, television programs featuring "unsolved mysteries" have once more publicized Bigfoot, but to my knowledge nobody has studied the relationship between the appearance of these programs and reports of sightings.

Compared to the varied descriptions in newspaper accounts of the 19th century, viewers in the 20th century have gradually come to agree on Bigfoot's basic traits: he is seven or eight feet tall, has a bad odor and a high-pitched scream, and frequently performs some act that takes a great deal of strength. Some details, especially the shape of his face or the color of his hair, may vary considerably. Curiously, he usually, but not always, comes at night or at twilight, and often has the ability to move extremely rapidly, quicker than a man or a horse. And he *always* comes quite unexpectedly, surprising the witness. In fact, those who have intentionally gone to find and photograph Bigfoot have not succeeded in finding him, though some have discovered footprints and hair samples.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, there was great national interest in the search for Bigfoot, as evidenced by the production in 1967 of Doug Wendt's film, *Sasquatch Among Us*, by newsletters devoted exclusively to Bigfoot research, and by many newspaper accounts on the subject. One of the most famous researchers was Peter Byrne, a big game hunter from Ireland, at one time the director of the International Wildlife Conservation Society of Washington, D. C. Mr. Byrne searched for both Yeti and Bigfoot over many years beginning in 1948, and during one newspaper interview, said that although he doubted that Yeti was real, he gave Bigfoot a "95% chance of existing." However, even after months of waiting in the area of The Dalles, Oregon, he never managed to get a glimpse of Bigfoot. (5)

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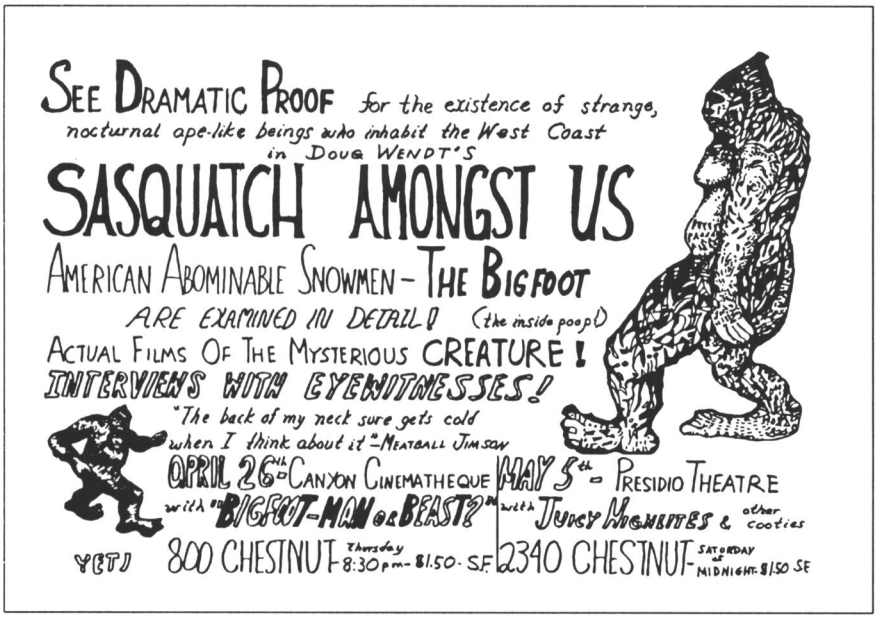
SEE DRAMATIC PROOF for the existence of strange, nocturnal ape-like beings who inhabit the West Coast
in DOUG WENDT'S
SASQUATCH AMONGST US
AMERICAN ABOMINABLE SNOWMEN - THE BIGFOOT
ARE EXAMINED IN DETAIL! (the inside poop!)
ACTUAL FILMS OF THE MYSTERIOUS CREATURE!
INTERVIEWS WITH EYEWITNESSES!
"The back of my neck sure gets cold when I think about it" - MENTAL JIM SAY
APRIL 26th - CANYON CINEMATHEQUE
with "BIGFOOT-MAN OR BEAST?"
800 CHESTNUT - Thursday 8:30 pm - $1.50 - SF
MAY 5th - PRESIDIO THEATRE
with JUICY WIGHLITES & other cooties
2340 CHESTNUT - SATURDAY AT MIDNIGHT - $1.50 SF
YETI

HANDBILL PROMOTING A 1970S SHOWING OF DOUG WENDT'S BIGFOOT FILM.

Recently, experts investigated claims that an Indian on the Fort Bidwell Paiute Reservation in Modoc County, California, had spotted a hairy 8-foot tall man with silver eyes who could run very fast. Erik Beckjord, director of the Crypto Zoology Museum in Malibu, California, who visited the site with cameras and plaster, was not surprised that Bigfoot appeared on an Indian reservation: "For some reason Bigfoot seems to be more comfortable around Indians," Beckjord commented. After the investigation, Beckjord left with plaster casts of footprints, but nothing more. (6)

Searches in Asia for a man-animal like Yeti have also proven fruitless; a team of 100 Chinese researchers from the China Wildman Research Center, set up in 1960, went to the mountainous forests of Hubei province in 1988 in an attempt to uncover the mystery of a man-ape who has lived in the area for 3,000 years, and who has been seen by many peasants in recent years. The researchers returned with hair samples, which they analyzed, and reported that these hairs could not belong to any one of the nine other animals in the

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area, since the levels of calcium, iron, and copper were higher in the "wildman." The Chinese team thus believed that their study proved objectively the existence of the wildman, "a rare and advanced primate that is similar to man." (7)

A few recent accounts in Ohio and Pennsylvania link Bigfoot with UFOs, but Linda Milligan believes the accounts have been influenced by the printed publications of this link. She further notes that Bigfoot the animal has not yet changed into Bigfoot the Alien, at least not in Ohio. (8)

There is always the nagging question, "Does Bigfoot REALLY exist?" It is puzzling that so many people have seen Bigfoot or Sasquatch, and yet nobody has ever shot one and brought the body into the authorities. (Certainly human beings don't seem to refrain from shooting animals, or even other people.) It is also strange that many researchers have gone looking for the animal and not found one, not even a carcass. Some of the arguments against the existence of Bigfoot include the following: the footprints were made by hoaxers, or by animals or human beings whose tracks were widened by rain or melting snow; the photographs were either deliberate hoaxes or optical illusions; the sightings were nothing more than hallucinations or projections of ancient "archetypes" within the human psyche.

On the other hand, perhaps there really exists a separate sub-species of hairy beings in North America and elsewhere who have eluded scientists. Or, perhaps Bigfoot is an actual human being afflicted by a genetic condition called "hypertrichosis," in which long hair grows all over the body, including the entire face. There is the famous case of Peter Gonzales, born in the 16th century in the Canary Islands, who apparently came from a family, all of whom had the condition. He was presented as a gift to King Henry II of France and became a part of the king's entourage of dwarfs, giants, and other anomalous beings. (9) Or perhaps Bigfoot is a remnant of an earlier being, the last survivor of a former hominoid who was displaced by *homo sapiens.*

Attempts to "prove" the existence or non-existence of Bigfoot are, however, fruitless; we can find many people and books that take either side. In fact, no authentic belief legend can be proven by anyone to be either true or false; if it were

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already a scientific, accepted reality, there would be no legend surrounding it. From a folkloristic point of view, belief legends are always in dispute: " 'Real' folk legend must produce a reason and feasibility to profess faith, to take a stand for or against belief." (10)

I have always contended that folklorists must refrain from attempts to prove or disprove a legend or any other form of folklore, leaving that effort to other disciplines. They should instead concentrate on gathering and analyzing texts, making comparative studies, and looking for the meaning of the item for the group. (11) Studying folklore, and for that matter any other subject, always proves much more exciting if we approach it without preconceived notions about truth.

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